Erin Brockovich: Virtue versus Litigation

Throughout the history of American cinema, many films have been created within the genre of legal drama. In the case of Erin Brockovich (2000), the title character—a single mother of three and a former Miss Wichita—defies expectations by convincing hundreds of families to sue the $28 billion company Pacific Gas and Electric, who has poisoned the water supply of Hinkley, California with hexavalent chromium. The result of the case—$333 million in damages—became the largest settlement in a direct-action lawsuit in United States history.

While Erin Brockovich may be written off by some as a typical David versus Goliath story about a civil lawsuit, a deeper understanding of the film shows it to have a much more intricate message: that an everyday heroine can use common sense and dedication to redeem a group of people harmed by an unjust system. Film elements, such as the acting, cinematography, lighting, costumes, dialogue, and characterization, are used to develop this theme, as well as to personify ideas regarding feminism, politics, and the legal justice system. The fact that the film is based on a true story also adds complexity to its message, and while audiences may be in disagreement about whether they find the story inspiring, the film is undoubtedly unique.

The initial impressions of Erin Brockovich’s character are formed very early on in the film based on her appearance. In the book The Art of Watching Films, the authors describe the importance of characterization through appearance, and the effect this has on a viewer’s understanding of the film: “The minute we see most actors on screen, we make certain assumptions about them because of their facial features, dress, physical build, and mannerisms and the way they move. Our first visual impression may be proven erroneous as the story progresses, but it is certainly an important means of establishing character” (Boggs and Petrie
This form of characterization is extremely important in *Erin Brockovich*, as Erin’s appearance and wardrobe are intentionally misleading. Throughout almost the entire movie, Erin is dressed in evocative and tight clothing, leading audiences to stereotype Erin as an irresponsible single mother of the “trailer trash” variety. As the film progresses, it becomes clear that this initial assessment is completely off the mark. When Erin files a lawsuit against a doctor who ran a red light and injured her, neither her lawyer, Ed Masry—who repeatedly ignores her—nor the jury seem to believe her story. Her unsophisticated speech and provocative looks appear to influence their assessments of her. Erin’s story is in fact true, and this particular situation is just one of many in which she is misunderstood.

Erin proves that she has a high degree of wit and persistence by demanding a job at Ed Masry’s office: “There’s two things that aggravate me, Mr. Masry: being ignored and being lied to…I don’t need pity, I need a paycheck.” When Erin’s female coworkers complain about her manner of dressing, Erin responds by saying, “Well, it just so happens, I think I look nice. And as long as I have one ass instead of two, I’ll wear what I want, if that’s all right with you.” Erin is completely confident with herself, knows that she deserves respect, and isn’t afraid to speak her mind forthrightly. In blunt terms, Erin wears tight clothing to appear sexy to men, and she uses this attraction to her advantage. When Masry asks Erin, “What makes you think you can just walk [into the Hinkley water board] and take whatever you want?” Erin responds, “They’re called boobs, Ed.”

Erin’s dress is in direct contrast with that of the female attorney Theresa Dellavale. Legal scholars Michael McCann and William Haltom write that the “explicit references to [Erin’s] lack of legal acumen accentuate the triumph of the legal outsider over corporate malfeasance and lawyerly nonfeasance” (1050). Whereas Theresa’s modest wardrobe emphasizes her
“professional distance, book learning, and icy, desexualized demeanors” (1051), Erin combines “sexuality and humanity with street smarts” (1051). Erin chooses not to conform to the standards of the actual lawyers in the trial, which accounts for why the people of Hinkley place trust in her and tell her their stories unreservedly. In an article for Salon.com, Charles Taylor describes the impact this has on the film:

Unlike her co-workers in the law office, the folks she encounters in the desert town don't look at her and see a bimbo wearing high heels and push-up bras that peek out of her skimpy tops. To the movie's credit Erin doesn't spruce up and stop wearing the cheap flashy clothes she knows she looks sexy in. It's as if [Director Steven] Soderbergh is inviting us to make the same mistake everyone else does and underestimate Erin because of the way she looks.

Erin gracefully admits when she makes mistakes, but she rigorously defends herself when she knows she is right, and isn’t willing to sacrifice her personality for a judgmental individual’s benefit.

Another set of important elements to consider in the characterization of Erin are her actions and the choices she makes throughout the film. In the beginning of the film, Erin says “I just want to take good care of my kids.” This does in fact seem to be the prime motivator for all of her actions. It is because of her children that she goes on countless job interviews, desperately trying to convince employers that she is the right person for the job. Her act of demanding work from Ed Masry is not a result of personal ambition or hatred towards him for not defending her properly in court; instead, it comes from the anxiety of striving to provide for her children. Her love for her kids also influences her interactions with the families in Hinkley who have been harmed by PG&E, as she is filled with a deeper sense of empathy for them than the other lawyers working on the case. Erin makes personal connections with the victims of PG&E, whereas the
lawyers consider them merely “plaintiffs” and don’t seem to care about their personal hardships. This helps develop the theme that everyday virtue is often more influential than litigation.

Erin uses her emotions to help build the case, but at the same time she isn’t overwhelmed by them; instead, she targets them in a positive, powerful way. If Erin were to behave as the other lawyers do, she would become detached and less human, and not as successful at her job. But another paradox of Erin’s character is revealed by the fact that she doesn’t become consumed with her emotions to the point that the film seems overly sentimental. This is due mainly to the acting of Julia Roberts:

The script contains a number of scenes in which Erin stands up to PG&E's flunky lawyers and to the hotshot attorney (Peter Coyote) Ed hires to assist with the lawsuit, and Roberts never gives in to the temptation to grandstand. Nor does she ever give in to the temptation to become mushy or condescending in her scenes with the people she persuades to join the lawsuit. Even Roberts' compassion is hard-edge here. (Taylor)

Erin’s tough attitude is a part of who she is, but she most often employs her quick wit and common sense, and only engages in a screaming match when she deems it absolutely necessary.

As stated above, the acting of Julia Roberts is one of the hallmark features of the film, so much so that she won the Best Actress Oscar for that year. The acting of Roberts is truly spectacular, and it still remains in the minds of many film critics as one of the most powerful performances of her career. Part of the reason why Roberts is believable as Erin Brockovich is because they share a number of things in common. As a movie star, Roberts’ looks were often criticized, just as Erin fails to receive well-deserved respect because of her appearance. Erin’s act of breaking the stereotype of the typical underprivileged single mother can be aligned in some ways to Roberts’ own action of breaking stereotypes within her career. After starring in standard-plot romantic comedies like *Runaway Bride* and *Notting Hill,* Erin Brockovich...
presented her with a more complex, realistic role. Julia Roberts dominates the film and successfully possesses the main character, prompting the filmmakers to develop the simple yet effective popular tagline, “Julia Roberts is Erin Brockovich.”

The cinematography and lighting are also important aspects of *Erin Brockovich*. In his article for Slate Magazine, David Edelstein writes:

On paper, the story of *Erin Brockovich* might seem smugly pat—knee-jerk anti-corporate. But the director, Steven Soderbergh, keeps the menace vague, the horror intangible. He and his great cinematographer, Ed Lachman, don't force the idea that this landscape is malignant. But the poison is implicit in the harsh light and baked-out colors and in the flags that blow clank-clank in the hot breeze.

The intense sunlight in the shots of Hinkley implies that the truth and hardships faced by the victimized families will be revealed for the first time, and the dry, desert landscape represents the life that PG&E has drained from Hinkley. Natural lighting is used in most of the scenes of the film, giving it an incredibly realistic texture and tone, which was especially important to achieve in this film, as it was based on a true story. The lighting in this film also differs from that of other legal dramas. The scenes in these films are usually darkened and employ low-key lighting in order to give the film a serious tone and to glamorize the law profession. *Erin Brockovich* features scenes with high-key lighting, giving complete visual information to give the film an upbeat feel. In *The Art of Watching Films*, high-key and low-key lighting are differentiated: “Low-key lighting puts most of the set in shadow…. [and] heightens suspense and creates a somber mood…. High-key lighting, in contrast, results in more light areas than shadows…. [and] is suitable for comic and light moods” (Boggs and Petrie 60). While the subject matter of *Erin Brockovich* is serious, the high-key lighting is appropriate because it is consistent with the film’s goal of realism and supports the instances of comic relief.
The cinematography and types of camera shots are also used to develop theme. While the four points of view described in *The Art of Watching Films* are present to some degree, the subjective and indirect-subjective points of view seem to be the most important and unique in terms of contributing to mood and texture.

The subjective point of view gives the audience a sense of “the visual viewpoint and emotional intensity felt by a character participating in the action,” and obligates the audience “to become the characters and experience their emotions” (Boggs and Petrie 128). This technique is recurrent throughout the film to present the viewer with Erin’s perspective. When Erin has her meeting with the Daniels family, the camera zooms in on Annabelle, who is suffering from a brain tumor. This shot forces the viewer to see from Erin’s point of view, which amplifies the personal connection between the two characters at that moment. This part of the film provides a better sense of Erin’s character, and reinforces her deep virtue of empathy. Edelstein describes this effect of the subjective point of view when he writes: “[Soderbergh] keeps a compassionate distance from the movie’s cancer victims—he lets you see them through Erin’s eyes and share her sense of helplessness.” The subjective viewpoint is also used very effectively in the last shot of the film. After the lawsuit with PG&E, Erin and Ed Masry begin work on another case. Erin gets out of her car and walks up to the doorstep of another client. As she knocks on the door, she looks directly into the camera. This shot suggests that viewers themselves could one day be the victim of a large corporation, and even if Erin Brockovich isn’t personally there to help you, the qualities of persistence, dedication, and empathy will.

The indirect-subjective point of view is used in shots that “[do] not provide a participant’s point of view, but [they do] bring us close to the action so that we feel intimately involved and our visual experience is intense,” and are often in the form of “a close-up that conveys the emotional reaction of a character” (Boggs and Petrie 130). This point of view surfaces at the very beginning of the film, when
Erin is applying for a job at a doctor’s office. When describing herself and how her experience as a mother would help her in this type of job, Erin’s face is lit up and she is very enthusiastic. But once she figures out that the interview is going downhill, a close-up of her face shows her immediate disappointment and annoyance. Because we are so close to Erin, we can identify with her stress. The audience also sees close-ups such as these when Erin is in court after the car accident, when she is applying for work over the phone, and when she is making calls to Ed Masry’s office. These types of shots allow the viewer to experience the action in the film, and to understand the types of emotions Erin is feeling at that particular moment.

Establishing the genre of the film is another important step that must be taken to classify theme. The intense emotion presented in *Erin Brockovich* led Elaine Roth of *Feminist Media Studies* to classify the film within the genre of melodrama, which “is commonly characterized by clear delineations between good and bad (as in doing the ‘right' thing)” (51). This point is established directly by the dialogue, when Erin says “You’re doing the right thing, Mr. Masry,” and “I admit I don’t know shit about shit but I know right from wrong!” The film “uses the genre of melodrama to make a political statement in support of grassroots activism and against corporate power” (51). The film’s defiant protagonist and her compassionate connections between the victims of PG&E’s chromium pollution force the audience to rethink ideas about culture and society: “Rather than burying a political argument within an otherwise syrupy and inconsequential plot, it is the melodramatic elements—the sympathy and the visceral connections made with the audience—that actively promote liberal films’ progressive agendas” (52).

*Erin Brockovich* applies these moral characteristics in unique ways to address other themes as well. For instance, the film creates substantial feminist implications, such as whether mothers should work and the respect that women deserve in the workplace. The film successfully answers both of these questions through the use of melodrama: women earn respect based on their quality of work and dedication, not their background or marital history, and it is honorable for women to have a job to support their children. This last point is brought out clearly when Erin says of her job, “I’m doing more for my kids now than I did living with my parents. One day, they’ll understand that.”
The way this message is delivered is also an important contribution to why *Erin Brockovich* became so successful. The film focuses on character development and interpersonal relations to create a dynamic story, rather than an objective case study of the plaintiffs of Hinkley, California, versus Pacific Gas and Electric. David L. Kirp states in his article “Women on the Verge” that “*Erin Brockovich* turns conventional gender politics, with its queasiness about sex, on its head. It deliciously subverts the solemnity of the political message, and that’s what makes it entertainment, not a two-hour public service announcement.”

However, not all of the feminist ideas portrayed in the film can be considered positive. Judith Grant, in an article studying the intersection of law and popular culture, is especially critical of the film for the messages it delivers, and how it could shape Americans’ conceptions of women in society:

The gender politics of this film are also vexed. Besides Erin, the only other working women in the film are either the jealous ones with whom Brockovich works at Masry’s firm, or the asexual, masculinized female attorneys who work in the upscale personal injury firm. Brockovich is romanticized as an authentic member of the working class who can go in there and speak their lingo. However, she is “still a woman,” not ashamed to use sex to get the job done. This presents another anomaly. Despite the film’s point of view, it is less odd to find sexiness and brains in the same package than it is to find men taking that combination seriously as they apparently do with Erin. In reality, the seemingly asexual attorney in the upscale firm got that way for a reason, and it is not her own frigidity!

Grant argues further that the Hollywood-nature of the film detracted from its realism. Erin represents the perfect combination of feminine sensibility and attraction with intelligence. Anything less than that is satirized in the film. For instance Theresa Dellavale most likely sacrificed a great deal of herself in order to succeed in the law profession, but the audience is subconsciously encouraged to ignore this. Instead, entertainment is found in Erin telling her that she has “fucking ugly shoes.” While viewers have come to realize that this is Erin’s way of
demanding respect and defending herself, they might neglect to consider whether Theresa truly
deserved this insult, or if she was behaving in a way that was appropriate to her profession.

Grant is also concerned with the implications that arise regarding both the nature of the
legal system of the United States and the treatment of working women:

In any case, as she herself admits in the film, her devotion to the case against \textit{PG\&E} is partly a
self-esteem issue for Erin. It is the first time, she says, that anyone ever treated her with any
respect. Through quirks of timing and luck, the real Erin ended up making a bundle of money and
having Julia Roberts play her in the movie. However, most women in her situation get little more
than a string of bad boyfriends, minimum wage jobs and objectifying sex. The devotion of the
Erin Brockovichs of the world is not the answer to corporate crime, nor is she a role model for the
working class women who want to fight the big guys. She is a glorious exception that proves that
the rules must be changed.

What is disconcerting about the story of PG\&E and Hinkley is that if Erin was not able to
uncover the smoking gun by luck, the victims may have never received the money that they so
deserved to pay for medical expenses. It was also a matter of luck that Erin discovered the
problems with the water in Hinkley in the first place, and without it, Erin, like so many other
women, might not has received the respect she was looking for.

McCann and Haltom examine how \textit{Erin Brockovich} and other films about public interest
litigation satirize lawyers and legal proceedings in a slightly different way. According to their
analysis of \textit{Erin Brockovich}, the film “both derides lawyers who represent underdogs and
endorses the responsiveness of the legal system to an extraordinary outsider to law who fights for
them” (1047). They also argue that films like \textit{Erin Brockovich} exemplify that the term “civil
justice” is an oxymoron, because justice cannot be secured in these contexts unless someone
disconnected from the legal system struggles for the victims’ rights. The lawyers are mere
caricatures and hardly effective. Erin personifies the importance of legal outsiders when she says: “Ya know why everyone thinks that all lawyers are back-stabbing, blood-sucking scumbags? Because they are!”.

The lawyers for both the defendants and plaintiffs all seem to be characterized in this way. The lawyers for the defendants appear robot-like, and the lawyers for the Hinkley victims are cold and unemotional. Although Ed Masry is shown in a positive light close to the end of the film, he initially appears barely proficient and hardly capable of doing a lawyer’s work. He doesn’t seem to care at all about winning Erin’s case and never returns her phone calls, and it makes the viewer question whether Masry treats all of his clients with such indifference. It makes perfect sense that Erin steps in to help the people of Hinkley, for the simple fact that no one else will. If for some reason the people of Hinkley were able to figure out what PG&E was doing to the water, organize themselves, and hire lawyers, it is doubtful that the lawyers would have acted with enough passion to win the case or make PG&E pay the large amount of damages that they did in the film.

While judged by many film critics to be an overly fantasized feel-good movie, Erin Brockovich, both as a film and a character, defy and surpass expectations. Film elements prove the need for empathy, perseverance, and common sense, while simultaneously hinting at the importance of respect for women in the workplace and the need for a more effective way to deliver justice to a dishonest and abusive corporation. The story of Erin Brockovich emphasizes that while the actions of the individual are important, the strength and power of an organization or community are just as important. In this way Erin Brockovich truly acts as a catalyst to “bring a small town to its feet and a huge company to its knees.”
Works Cited


